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Nicole Huang, *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s.*

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This book is an easy read, devoid of unnecessary jargon that would obstruct the flow of pleasurable reading. Even though the author is not theoretically-minded, she responds to key issues, such as the debates on women and domesticity involved in war politics, thus showing her familiarity with, and sensitivity to, current academic trends in both English and Chinese scholarly communities.

Nicole Huang starts and ends her book with detailed analysis of the legendary writer Eileen Chang, who with a few other women writers, such as Su Qing and Pan Liudai, made their names as popular writers in Japanese-occupied Shanghai during the period between 3 December 1941 and 15 August 1945. In the "Prologue" of the book, the image of Scarlett O'Hara, the female protagonist of the Hollywood movie *Gone with the Wind* released in 1940s Shanghai, is used as a symbol of "a beauty at a turbulent time" and as an analogy to the women writers discussed in the book. The imagery of the travels of Scarlett O'Hara in Shanghai, through different film, drama, and novelistic adaptations, is nicely

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rounded off in the "Epilogue," when Eileen Chang, like "a flower at sea" (a reference to both a famous late Qing novel and her own short story written in the mid-1950s), is seen traveling from Shanghai to Hong Kong after the Pacific war, and then to the United States, where she lived until her solitary death in 1995.

Using Shanghai under the Japanese occupation as the backdrop of her book, Huang by no means limits her discussions to those four years, but rather tries to link them to previous traditions and later developments. For instance, the women's print culture developed during the Japanese occupation, of which these women writers were champions, is traced back to the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School literature, which had been popular in Shanghai since the late nineteenth century. As Huang points out, it was the male writers of this school who promoted the writings of young women such as Eileen Chang in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. Another example is Huang's discussion of the women's magazine *Nüsheng* (Women's voices), in which she again draws the reader's attention to the tradition of the women's journals since the late Qing, showing that *Women's Voices* distinguished itself from previous women's magazines by developing a discourse on domesticity marked by the "new knowledge" it propagated: thus giving women both a new self-consciousness and techniques for everyday living.

Logical as it is for Huang to dutifully remind us of the vast heritage from the late Qing, I wonder if it was necessary to lay out these well-known facts in such lengthy detail. They could be mentioned briefly and the reader referred to scholars who have already done extensive research on them. I would be more interested in how different groups of women writers contributed to the uniqueness of the cultural landscape of this period. Although Huang lumps them together under the same rubric "women writers," they were not as unified as

she makes them sound. The ideological and stylistic differences between the group centered around *Women's Voices* and Eileen Chang's circle of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly School is exactly a case in point.

Huang does mention that Guan Lu, the coeditor of *Women's Voices*, was a leftist writer working undercover for the journal. The problem is that when discussing the editorial policy of the journal, Huang seems to be saying that Guan's ideological propensity had no influence over the journal's direction: "Guan Lu's position on the board of a journal that has been conventionally defined as a 'collaborationist' production indicates that a relatively autonomous editing agenda was permitted, albeit under the shadow of the control of wartime occupation" (p. 102). Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that Tamura Toshiko, the Japanese editor-in-chief, as well as Guan Lu were leftist writers, even though the latter was working undercover. If a "relatively autonomous editing agenda" did exist for the journal, it was "autonomous" in the sense that the leftist agenda transcended or blurred the boundaries between occupier and occupied. Indeed, Huang does not sufficiently appreciate the leftist ideology of *Women's Voices*, which permeated the textuality of the journal and informed individual articles. The most obvious example is the journal's advocacy of a "truly dynamic modern woman," which Huang discusses at some length; but she fails to see the political implications involved (p. 111). As Huang points out, the editorial board did aim at debunking the modern woman who was envisioned as "trendy," "stylish," and "pleasure-seeking," especially by Shanghai Neo-Sensationists such as Liu Na'ou, Mu Shiying, Ye Lingfeng, and Guo Jianying. These male writers of the 1920s and the 1930s were criticized by leftist writers such as Lu Xun and Tang Na as belonging to the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School and were dismissed as "decadent" and "commercialized,"

catering to "popular taste." In this sense, the editorial board of *Women's Voices* was arguing in the leftist tradition, advocating a new kind of modern woman: hard-working, progressive, and self-sacrificing. An example of this tradition was the 1935 leftist movie *Xinnüxing* (The new woman), which featured Ruan Lingyu as a decadent woman writer, drunk and unhealthy, and constantly contrasted her with a progressive, healthy woman worker.

Thus one can easily see that Eileen Chang and such women writers in her circle as Su Qing and Pan Liudai—craving public attention, new fashions, good food, and a leisurely life—fit the image of "modern woman" that was being criticized by *Women's Voices*. It is surprising that Nicole Huang seems unaware of the ideological distinction between these two groups of women writers. In fact, a mainland critic has recently argued that Tamura Toshiko did, indeed, play a key role on the editorial board of *Women's Voices*, successfully securing the independence of the board from its Japanese supporters in February 1943.[1] Her role might not have been so "minor" or "marginal" as Nicole Huang believes.

The interpretation of domesticity, on which the book is mainly based, also falls somewhat short of expectation. To be sure, Huang's introduction convincingly argues that domesticity was a "contested site" (p. 35). Huang criticizes Rey Chow for taking for granted "the association between the female, the domestic and the trivial details," even though a "new type of femininity is classified in Rey Chow's provocative categorization of Eileen Chang: it is a femininity that is characteristically intimate, domestic, sensuous, pre-rational, trivial, and obsessed with its sexual being, yet it embodies subversive strength and transgressive potential." Yet according to Huang, Chang was not a marginal

1 Tu Xiaohua, "Shanghai lunxian shiqi nüsheng zazhi de kaocha," (The magazine *Women's Voices* in occupied Shanghai) *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* (Journal of modern Chinese literary studies), 3 (1995), pp. 85-104.

figure in her time; indeed, "Chang was very much in the mainstream and she and others like her were the principal architects of a unique wartime popular culture." Huang therefore asks forcefully: "Are there any other ways to define the significance of Chang's domesticity without resorting to the 'powerfully negative affect' [that Rey Chow believes it carries]?" (p. 37)

Nevertheless, Huang fails to explain exactly how domesticity was a "contested site" in occupied Shanghai. All the women writers and women's magazines she discusses from chapters two through four seem to have taken the same approach to the issue of domesticity. Her claim in the "Introduction" that women's writing "reorganized daily experiences of women and became the center of public dialogues in 1940s Shanghai" (p. 39) is not followed up in later chapters. We seem to witness all women intellectuals at the time voicing concerted opinions and showing the same attitude towards the issue of domesticity: "they demonstrated a fascination with everyday matters, an uninhibited desire to talk about their own life experiences, and superb ability to manipulate the hazy boundaries between the authorial voice and the narrative self" (p. 38). No "dialogues," however, are shown in the book. How could it be true that no debates erupted among different groups of women? There seem to have been no contexts, no debates, among different groups of women.

Again, I think to compare Eileen Chang's circle with the *Women's Voices* circle would shed light on the notion of domesticity as a "contested site." The magazine's "persistence in defining domesticity and everyday life in intricate detail," as Huang puts it (p. 89), should be examined more carefully and set apart from the strategies used by Eileen Chang's circle in demonstrating "a fascination with everyday matters." For one thing, though centering on daily material life of urban women, the magazine never lost sight of their "country sisters,"

backward, lacking new knowledge, and in need of "initial enlightenment"—this choice of words disclosing the magazine's strong belief in the idea of progress. This kind of vocabulary would never have entered the diction of Eileen Chang's group, who were in essence narcissistic, decadent, and thus, counter-historical, so to speak. When the magazine insisted that rural women's "good qualities," such as dedicated mothering, "hardworking," and "frugality," should be emulated by urban women, it was not simply exercising "classificatory strategies," as Huang believes. Rather, it was criticizing urban women who relegated their motherly duty to wet nurses and virtually did nothing but shop, follow the latest fashion, and have manicures. The magazine's strategy of praising rural women as paragons of virtue demonstrates its leftist stance.

It is clear that the didacticism in *Women's Voices*' discussions of domesticity should not be confounded with Eileen Chang's circle's "fascination with everyday matters." For Eileen Chang's circle, the everyday perhaps represented an alternative, even a challenge, to the politicized domesticity preached by both the right and the left. When Rey Chow talks about the "powerfully negative affect" of Chang's aesthetic indulgence in insignificant, "sensual details" of everyday life, she is in fact echoing the Frankfurt School's dialectic rooted in an absolute method of negativity, a modernist strategy to defy the idea of progress and social mobilization. My point is not that Chow is necessarily correct but simply that Huang has perhaps lost sight of the theoretical complexities of her arguments.

For a convincing analysis of how domesticity and women's behavior became a contested site in postwar France, one may refer to Mary Louise Roberts' *Civilization Without Sexes*.[2] Roberts describes how soldiers returning from war

2 Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927*

could no longer recognize their wives, sisters, and daughters, who had become embodiments of *la femme moderne* totally liberated from traditional virtues. The veterans were scandalized when they saw their women with short hair, *à la garçonne*, wearing revealing clothes, dancing without corsets, smoking cigarettes, cheating on their fiancés and husbands, and doing jobs previously taken by men. Women's relentless pursuit of hedonism in the postwar years made men's sacrifices and traumas during the war seem ridiculous. On the other hand, to boost patriotism, social solidarity, and the morale of men fighting the war, the image of the traditional redemptive woman, the angel in the hearth, was also being constructed and apotheosized: the devoted mother, the faithful wife, the self-sacrificing nurse, and the dutiful daughter. Only when contesting views on domesticity and women are directly presented, can we talk about domesticity as a "contested site."

Eileen Chang and her circle represented ideologically and economically independent modern women who demonstrated a femininity uncontrolled by traditionally held domestic virtues or the demands of social solidarity, and who managed to make a living by writing. They did not have to use their bodies to secure a pleasurable living as had the modern girls in the 1930s, who were ridiculed by men both attracted and threatened by their unruliness. Women writers like Chang, living in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, benefited from the war in the sense that the male intellectuals who had joined the resistance or become collaborators left a vacuum they could fill. They captured the hearts of a wartime audience who needed a diversion from the hardships of war and reassurance that humanity and daily life still went on. If the postwar decades of the 1920s and the 1930s in France were known as *les années folles* (the crazy

(Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

years), because people madly pursued pleasure regardless of the war and its suffering, did this *carpe diem* spirit also foster the success of the new Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School, represented by both these women writers in occupied Shanghai and the earlier Neo-Sensationists of the 1930s?

The *carpe diem* spirit coupled with the need for self-expression in a desperate time can also explain the booming of fashion during the war years. Again, a recent French study throws light on how the First World War accelerated the emancipation of women in France.[3] Besides going into factories, farms, hospitals, and the intelligence service, women took up jobs as tramway and taxi drivers, and served as prostitutes in army brothels and entertainers in army theaters to divert soldiers suffering from the hardships of war. Theatre artists, such as Damia (1889-1978), Mistinguett (1875-1956), and Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), participated in propaganda tours. Life did not stop because of the war, but was deeply transformed by it. How was it transformed? One article included in this book is especially illuminating. In "De l'odalisque de Poiret à la femme nouvelle de Chanel: une victore de la femme?" (From Poiret's odalisque to Chanel's new woman: a victory for women?"), Florence Brachet-Champsaur analyzes how fashion still boomed in wartime Paris, precisely as a new trend was being created. Coco Chanel, sensing women's need for clothes that would allow them the freedom of movement in the work place, introduced practical, clean-cut, elegant styles (resembling perhaps nurses' uniforms) that not only saved material but made the corset obsolete. Her clothes "walked into the streets," while Poiret's salon extravaganzas gradually became passé. Chanel became the first woman designer

3 Evelyne Morin-Rotureau, comp., *1914-1918: combats de femmes: les femmes, pilier de l'effort de guerre* (Paris: Editions Autrement, 2004).

to build a fashion empire in France. Her success bespoke a new concept of life that found expression in clothes. Her style symbolized the emancipated woman in postwar Europe. Other *couturières* made their names after her: Jeanne Lanvin and Madeleine Vionnet, among others, who gradually won a share of the fashion business from male designers. The war seemed to have liberated women, body as well as soul.

Brachet-Champsaur tells us that the profound change in the style of French fashion was as much the result of the women's emancipation movement as the consequences of the constraints of war: women at work, scarcity of materials, the high cost of living, and, most of all, the culpability of heartless coquetry at such a time. Another important factor was that the fashion industry in France claimed nearly the same revenue from exports during the war as it did before, because it had to compete, in the name of patriotism, with its American counterpart. Chanel's success during the war and postwar years should not be attributed to her talent alone. What her design expressed matched the spirit of the age.

Eileen Chang, on the other hand, though not a fashion designer, was a true connoisseur. She once said: "At the time of political turmoil, people had no power to improve their living conditions. All they could create was the environment attached to the body—that is what clothes are; each of us lives in our clothes,"[4] and in another occasion, "For those who are not good at speech, clothes are a kind of language, a mini drama that one carries with oneself."[5] I think Eileen Chang's fascination with fashion is a topic that may lead to a better understanding of the formation of femininity and fashion in occupied Shanghai as

4 "Genyiji," (A chronicle of changing clothes) in *Liuyan* (Written on water), (Taipei: Huangguan chubanshe, 1996), p. 73. First published in *Gujin banyuekan* (Past and present biweekly) 34 (December 1943).

5 "Tongyan wuji," (Children will say anything) in Liuyan (Written on water), (Taipei: Huangguan chubanshe, 1996), p. 12. First published in *Tiandi yuekan* (Heaven and earth monthly) 7-8 (May 1944).

well as the 1930s. Nicole Huang, while discussing this topic in chapter four, which centers on the formation of the modern essay, reaches a conclusion that is hardly satisfying to the reader: "It is exactly that moment of 'letting go,' that is, the moment that one gains the power and freedom to go beyond immediate material and political conditions that captures the essence of fashion in Chang's world" (p. 158). Fashion could be a "letting go" or a constraint, a liberation or confinement of body and self. If a constraint, it is a dramatic display of that constraint. It is also an endless negotiation with—conformity to or rebellion against—immediate material and political constraints. Most of all, fashion functions as the standardization of gender and class identity. Eileen Chang's essay "From the Ashes," three passages of which Huang translates into English, is in fact where we can vividly see this "mini drama": one girl student in Hong Kong started panicking when she heard that war had broken out, because though she had clothes to wear for every social function, including formal dinners and dances on yachts, she had nothing to wear for the war. If Huang had delved deeper into this topic, she might have shed new light on our understanding of the intricate relationships between fashion, femininity, and war.

Despite such criticisms, Nicole Huang's *Women, War, Domesticity* is a valuable addition to the literature, rich in information and written fluently. Huang has touched upon a great many key issues that deserve further investigation.